



IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN VETERANS OF AMERICA

U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Subcommittee on Health: VA's Mental Health Budget for FY08

IAVA Testimony

Mr. Chairman and members of the House Subcommittee on Health, on behalf of the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), thank you for this opportunity to address the issue of VA's Mental Health budget for FY08.

My name is SGT Patrick Campbell and I am a combat medic for the DC National guard, an OIF vet and the Legislative Director for the Iraq & Afghanistan Veterans of America. IAVA is the nation's first and largest organization for Veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. IAVA believes that the troops and veterans who were on the front lines are uniquely qualified to speak about and educate the public about the realities of war, its implications on the health of our military, and its impact on the strength of our country.

As my counselor at the local Vet Center would say, "No one goes to war and comes home the same person." And unfortunately for many soldiers the real battle begins the day they get home.

The Department of Veterans' Affairs proposes spending \$3 billion on Mental Health Programs in FY 08. Of that \$3 billion, 80% "will be devoted to the treatment of seriously mentally ill veterans, including those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder." Another \$360 million will fund the VA's mental health initiative and \$115 million is assigned to readjustment counseling. The VA proposes commendable increases to these vital mental health services, however the President's budget fails at a fundamental level. It assumes that the veterans who need help will ask for it.

Mr. Chair, as I have testified many times before, we in the military are a proud bunch. We are trained to overcome any obstacle and defeat any enemy. For most of my buddies the thought of attending counseling is admitting defeat in the mental war that rages well beyond the days we turn in our weapons and take off our uniforms.

I am a combat medic, a graduate student, an advocate of mental health services for a veterans service group and someone who has counseled many of my battle buddies to seek counseling. When it came time for me to admit that I needed help, I just avoided it altogether. Thankfully I am blessed to have amazing friends who did not let me run away from my issues. After spending a year in denial, last month I was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Every time I admit I have PTSD it gets a little easier to say. That being said, I will never be able to shake that feeling that some soldier watching this testimony from home is shaking his head at me and under his breath calling me a whinier. So here I am before you in spite of myself and my own insecurities.

I can from personal experience that to think that even a majority of veterans who need help will ask for it is just plain naïve. The VA's passive approach of waiting for veterans to come to them just isn't working. Returning soldiers **need and deserve** mandatory mental health counseling. We understand this is a radical shift from the incremental and passive approach the VA has undertaken since the beginning of the Global War on Terror. This approach is the only effective way to remove the stigma of seeking mental health counseling.

This subcommittee should lead the fight to ensure that every veteran receives at least one mental health screening with a trained professional. Every veteran should be required or incentivized to visit their local Vet Center within 6 months of their release of active duty. The VA could model their incentive program after the military's new recruitment plan (e.g., a massive PR campaign combined with paying soldiers to enroll in the program with prepaid credit cards). Lastly, the VA must ensure that those new veterans will be seen in a timely manner.

They say an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of intervention. By requiring all soldiers to submit to a mental health screening today we will be preventing millions and billions of dollars of intervention services.

There is a wooden sign that hangs over the door to the DC Vet Center, that says, "Welcome Home." I will never be the same man that I was before I left for Iraq. But I know that whoever I have become I will always have a home to go to when at the DC Vet Center. I just pray that every one of my battle buddies has the courage to find their way home.

Respectfully Submitted,

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